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Dear Friends,

On the third Sunday in October, as is our custom, we had a Family Eucharist. Those services are characterized by the singing of the Cherub, Junior, and Youth Choirs. The Junior and Youth Choirs presented the Offertory Anthem, "Shout Joyfully," and the Cherub Choir (K – 2) sang the anthem before the Gospel, "Praise the Lord, ye heavens adore him," and they made their offering with confidence, clarity, and joy: they had worked hard to prepare, and they were ready to take their place as leaders of the whole congregation at that point in worship.

The second element of a Family Eucharist is a sermon oriented especially to our youngest members. On this occasion I did something unusual for me and revisited a sermon I had first done many years ago. It was not exactly the same, but it featured a few of the same elements.

**Dollars, Euros, and Gift Cards from Heaven...** The sermon began with Lucas Veca, our Processional Crucifer for the day, assisting me by lowering a St. Elizabeth's canvas tote bag from the peak of the chancel arch. And within the bag I had a number of envelopes containing money in different forms; there was also a candle, matches, and a large ceramic bowl.

I began by taking a dollar bill and a dollar coin out of the bag, holding them up, and asking which was worth more. To this easy question many replied that they were worth the same—one dollar. I then lit the candle and held the dollar bill over the flame. As it caught fire, there was an audible gasp throughout the congregation, and soon the dollar bill was just ashes collecting in the ceramic bowl. I held the coin over the fire, and nothing happened. "Which," I asked again, "was more valuable?" Or which, if you know there is going to be a fire, would you rather have? It was another easy question.

We print two verses from the Gospel according to St. Matthew on each of our adult offering envelopes, and in the first one Jesus advises his followers: "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal....(6:30)" Put your efforts into a currency which is not vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life, he says. We all invest—our time, our hope, our efforts—in something; Jesus simply advises us to choose wisely, to choose a vehicle which will survive whatever life throws at us.

Our portfolios, our careers, our appearance, our health, our mental abilities, even our families are all much more insecure than we would like to believe. We can deny that insecurity, which is often a plausible short-term strategy, but that leaves us unprepared when the true nature of things makes its inevitable appearance. Or, while acknowledging the value and merits of all of those categories, we can look for something more reliable on which to base our identity and around which we might organize our very lives. God invites us to put God first not because God needs our attention or allegiance, but because the God who loves us wants us to be prepared for what will come our way.

**Playing God** The next phase of the sermon was my favorite. First, I invited a first grader to come forward. And when Nolan arrived at the chancel steps, I opened another envelope and gave him, one by one, ten dollars. He took them, evidently puzzled by what would happen next. “May I have one back?” I asked, and without hesitation he returned to me a dollar bill, and, having thanked him, I invited him to return to his seat with his father. But he didn’t move. There must be more to this, was the expression I saw on his face. It took my best efforts to convince him that the rest of the money was his to keep. Still somewhat incredulous, he went back to his pew.

I asked the congregation if I had been unfair to request a dollar back, and everyone agreed that I had not. I asked if I had been unreasonable or extreme in asking for a dollar back, and I got the same response. I asked if Nolan was better or worse off at the end of the transaction, and everyone agreed he was better off.

I then asked if there was a fifth grader present. It seemed like most of the Junior Choir shot their hands in the air, and I invited Meryl, who I think may have been first, to come out of the choir stall. I opened another envelope and presented to her, one by one, ten five-dollar bills. And at the end, I asked if I could have two of them back. Without hesitation, and with a big grin, she promptly presented them to me. If, as St. Paul observes (2 Cor 9:7), the Lord loves a cheerful giver, Meryl was especially beloved of God at that point. I then told her she could return to her place in the choir. She looked at the remaining \$40 in her hand, then back at me, then back at the money, and seemed almost frozen in place. “No, it really is yours to keep,” I assured her, and it was no trick or demonstration, it really was hers. Incredulous, she, too, went back to her place in the choir.

**Asking too much?** Had I asked too much of her? No one thought so. From whom had I asked more, from Nolan or from Meryl? They agreed that I had asked much more from Meryl, both in percentage and in total dollars. But which would you rather have, I asked, the nine dollars or the forty? The forty, everyone agreed. So even after giving more, 20%, Meryl had quite a lot left to take away.

Would it have made any difference if I had simply given Nolan and Meryl their money, sent them back to their seats, and then next month at the Family Eucharist asked them to come forward and give me a portion back? Without any warning of what I expected, and having had the whole month of thinking it was all theirs to keep, to spring that on them a month later would be mean-spirited and even cruel. When we know that what we have is a free gift, and when we have a clear idea of what is the right thing to do, giving off the top is easy and a joy. Nolan and Meryl were both grinning as they gave me, respectively, ten and twenty percent. The longer we hold the money and think of it as our own, the harder it is to be a cheerful giver. I think God’s hope for us is that we will walk away from having made our gift amazed at what we take back with us.

**Showing Up....**I then asked if there were any tenth graders in the room. A number of adults who had been paying attention put their hands in the air, but I was holding out for the real thing. I took out the envelope and held it up, hoping that there might be a taker in the congregation, but no one came forward. The free gift is here, but to get it, you have to come forward. And to come forward, you have to be in the right place. The envelope, unopened, went back into the bag.

I asked if there was a member of the Confirmation Class present, and Jack, also in the choir, put his hand up faster than anyone. I have always thought that being in the choir confers special blessings, but I had not focused on these potentially being material as well as spiritual. I pulled a Barnes and Noble gift card out of the bag, its amount not visible, and presented it to him with the admonition that he was to do something good with it. His task was in some ways more difficult than those of the first and fifth graders—they had clear standards to meet, and, having done that, knew they had discharged their responsibility. Jack will have to figure out what constitutes “something good,” whether some of that can be for him, and if so, what portion.

Joseph, one of the Senior Acolytes, got another Barnes and Noble gift card, and I announced that his was worth twice the value of Jack’s. Jack gave a good-natured grumble at that news, and I asked him if his card had in any way diminished in value because Joseph’s was larger. He and I both knew that it was a rhetorical question, but in the course of this exchange, Joseph’s delight in what he had received did seem visibly to increase. To Joseph also I gave the same instruction, “Do something good with this.” Joseph is older, and his amount is larger—does that make his assignment more difficult or more easy?

**Getting Ready to Go** Finally I asked if anyone was planning a trip to Europe soon, Steve raised his hand, and I invited him to come forward. I counted out ten Euro coins for him, and asked for, and received, two back. Euros are real money, but they are not real money here. Where I do my currency exchange in Ridgewood they neither give nor take coins, but in Europe the Euro coins are a very convenient form of money. If we are going someplace else, it is good to prepare by making sure that our assets will be in a form that we can actually use when we get there. And, not to belabor the point, we are all going someplace else....

**A few Post Scripts** As soon as I sat down, I began mentally kicking myself for still having the money for the tenth graders in my tote bag. After all the parables we have had this fall about extending the invitation to others when the first group declined to come, I could not believe that I had failed to invite a member of some other class or group. I thought about reopening this in the announcements, but the moment was past and I felt particularly stupid.

After the service was over and I was turning off the sound system, a young man came up to me and asked, “What would a sophomore have received?” “Are you a tenth grader?” I asked him. And when he said he was, I invited him to follow me up to the credence table in the sanctuary where I had stowed my tote bag. Garah was still playing the postlude, and there were people around so I had to be quiet. I pulled out the envelope for the tenth grader and gave him, one by one, ten ten-dollar bills. I asked for three back—30%—and he promptly returned it to me. “That’s it,” I said, “the rest is yours.” He looked down at the money, then back up at me. “Really?” “Really.” “I should have come up earlier,” he said. “But the point,” I replied, “is that you came up.” God doesn’t care if we’re late; what God wants is for us to figure it out and step up.

**I Create a Scandal** I later heard that one boy was very concerned as I burned the dollar bill, not that I would singe my fingers, but that I was doing something illegal. “Can he do that?” he urgently asked his mother. I was challenging a very core belief of our culture, one that even very young children have internalized. I was destroying something that seemed, well, almost sacred, and for that I might get in Big Trouble. I wasn’t just doing church stuff; I was messing with something that really mattered in real life. I am not going to make burning money a regular part of our liturgy, but I will continue to look for ways to make it clear that what goes on here is really about real life.

I heard that one of the people who had received a gift in the sermon came in the Parish Hall at Coffee Hour and underwrote a member of the Confirmation class for the CROP walk later that day. Another recipient did the same thing, saying something like, “I received a gift today; how can I not give one as well?” Another recipient, when the offering plate came by, put some of their new-found wealth into it, even though they had already given back all that was expected before.

The Lord isn’t the only one who loves cheerful givers; I think we all do. And, more than that, I think we all love to be cheerful givers. Giving—and money is part of it but by no means the only currency in which we trade—is one of the ways we genuinely “play God.”

**We Get to Choose** The first verse printed on our offering envelopes is followed by its successor in Jesus’ original speech. Having admonished us to lay up lasting treasures in heaven, Jesus delivers the punch line: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21).” The center of our lives will be determined not by what we think it ought to be, but by where we put our treasure. We have a choice, but once we make the choice, we have made the choice. So we should choose carefully.

**But the really good sermon that day was...**A final note from Sunday, October 16. In my sermon, as in this article, I spoke a lot about money, giving, and stewardship. But on that day we had a wonderful—and considerably more concise—reflection on the life of the Church. Graham and Lesley Jones, now juniors in high school, began by observing that their mother—accompanied by their father and siblings—brought them to St. Elizabeth’s every Sunday beginning long before they were born. Graham and Lesley went on to speak with clarity, feeling, and conviction about what St. Elizabeth’s had meant to them. It is an elegant brief tour through the last sixteen or so years of this parish, and might serve as a look ahead to you with very young children of your own. We should all be so blessed to have our children or grandchildren be able to stand up and say what Graham and Lesley presented to us on the 16<sup>th</sup>. And, if you listen to what they say, you will hear how it can be done. You may hear their presentation on our web-page—put your cursor on “The Church” (on the left of the option bar), then when the dropdown menu appears, move to “Stewardship,” then on the next menu click on “Annual Pledging.” On my browser (AOL) I had to give permission for “rich media content” to be displayed before the list of presentations appeared. Good to see that AOL recognizes the value of what we are putting out there.

**Coming Soon** Our next Family Sunday will be November 20 when we will receive annual pledge cards and have a celebratory brunch for the congregation at the end of each of the two morning services. Please mark your calendar and plan to take your rightful place among this community of cheerful givers.

The Rev. Cn. John G. Hartnett